

Remarks by Donald C. Winter
Secretary of the Navy
Naval Postgraduate School Graduation Ceremony
King Hall
Monterey, California
Friday, June 20, 2008

President Oliver, Dr. Ferrari. graduates, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the opportunity you have given me to share this important moment in your lives and careers.

Today's ceremony marks the culmination of an intense period of study for the students, and a moment of great satisfaction for those who helped them along the way.

I would like to thank the members of the faculty and administration for your work in making this day possible, and I would like to offer a special thank you to the families whose support for the graduates has been so important to their success.

I would also like to say a special thank you to the 40 foreign graduates from 16 countries in this class.

We feel strongly that your unique backgrounds and experiences make NPS a better school, and that our students are enriched by your interaction with them.

We hope that we made you feel welcome, and that many long-lasting friendships have been established between you and your American colleagues.

NPS is a great school, and its high standards are critical to its reputation in the Fleet and in the academic community.

I know what you have been through—and I know that it can be especially tough to be holed up in a library writing a paper with gorgeous weather and a great golf course nearby.

And so, with the rigors of graduate school in mind, I am considering a radical new marketing strategy for future applicants to NPS—the one used by Sir Ernest Shackleton as he prepared for his journey to the South Pole in 1909.

His advertisement for recruits was as follows:

“Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Honor and recognition in case of success.”

I am joking, of course, and I know that it is not fair to compare a South Pole journey to a few years in Monterey, but there is an important point to be made here.

You now stand as beneficiaries of graduate level education that has made you significantly more valuable to your services than you were when you began your study here 18 or 24 months ago.

Four years from now, after having served your payback commitments, you will have a decision to make—stay in or get out?

In a sense, many of you will have the choice of pursuing potentially more lucrative careers on the outside—or taking the Shackleton challenge.

While staying in the military may not always mean a hazardous journey with low wages, cold, and darkness as extreme as those offered to Shackleton's fellow explorers of the arctic, there is no question that a life in uniform entails sacrifices and hardships that go far beyond what one normally finds in civilian life.

But if you do decide to continue to serve, “honor and recognition” await those who choose the challenging journey that accompanies a career in defense of the Nation.

Or, in the words of my favorite football coach, Bo Schembechler, “those who stay will be champions.”

The truth is, the Nation faces real threats today, and the stakes are very high—higher than many realize.

There is a natural tendency to become complacent.

9/11 happened nearly seven years ago, and memories fade.

Ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are taking place many thousands of miles away, and most Americans perceive distant threats but dimly, and go about their lives as usual.

But is America safe?

Can we afford to become complacent?

Two weeks ago I came across a disturbing op-ed piece in the Wall Street Journal that argues that we cannot.

The author makes the following observation, quote:

“The world is simmering in the familiar rhetoric and actions of movements and

regimes . . . who swear to destroy us and others like us. Like their 20th century predecessors, they openly proclaim their intentions, and carry them out whenever and wherever they can. Like our own 20th century predecessors, we rarely take them seriously or act accordingly.” Unquote.

The idea of enemies makes most of us very uncomfortable.

We do not like to acknowledge that they exist—even if they scream from the top of their lungs to us and to the world that they are, and that they have dedicated their lives to proving it.

I am not pointing out anything new.

I am merely reminding you of the world the way it is, of what others themselves have repeatedly told us, and of the challenges we face.

We ought to take these challenges seriously.

I urge you to take the Shackleton challenge, and continue on the journey that may not promise the lifestyle and remuneration enjoyed by many of your peers, but does offer the prospect of rewards in terms of honor and recognition on which one cannot put a price.

Those of you who serve in the armed services, in homeland security, and in civilian capacities in the national security realm have undertaken a great and worthy task.

You serve a noble cause.

America has, from its very birth, stood for certain ideas about liberty that define us as a Nation—in our hearts as citizens, and in the eyes of the world.

The signers of the Declaration of Independence pledged each other their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

They believed that what they had created was an historic achievement—and worth fighting for.

They also wrote that it was not only their right, but their duty “to provide new Guards for their future security.”

Notice how the Founders insisted that providing for their future security was not only a right, but a duty.

Our rights mean little unless this Nation can find patriots willing to provide

guards for our future security—patriots who believe that we have both rights and duties.

We have invested heavily in your education here.

We consider it a long-term investment, with the potential for a high rate of return.

So should you.

The greatest value of the education you have received is the ability to think critically, analytically, and rigorously.

Long after you have forgotten the details of the various subjects you have labored over these past few years, you will have retained the essentials, the tools that will serve you well for the remainder of your careers.

You will also take with you the many advantages of having developed relationships with those from other services, from other nations, and from other walks of life.

Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said that the Naval Postgraduate School changed his professional life, and put him on an upward trajectory at an early point in his career.

All of you are now on an upward trajectory, with the potential of achieving great things in the days ahead.

I urge you to take the Shackleton challenge, and seek the higher rewards of honor and recognition for those who serve.

We need you.

Our Nation needs you.

The Founders had great foresight, and America today stands on the shoulders of giants.

It is not only the right, but the duty of citizens to defend their hard-won independence, and to protect the blessings of liberty for future generations.

Thank you all—students, faculty, staff, and families—for choosing a life of service.

Best of luck to the graduates in your future endeavors, and may God continue to bless America.